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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARAMARIBO 000311

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DEPT FOR WHA/CAR - LLUFTIG  
DEPT FOR WHA/PD - APRUITT, GADAMS, EDETTER  
DEPT FOR PA/PRS  
USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA  
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV PGOV PREL EAID ECON NS

SUBJECT: SURINAMESE FLOODS TWO WEEKS ON: PAST CRISIS PHASE

REFS: (A) PARAMARIBO 266; (B) PARAMARIBO 269; (C) PARAMARIBO

270

PARAMARIBO 00000311 001.2 OF 002

¶1. Summary: While the ongoing rainy season may yet bring new challenges, for now the flooding disaster in Suriname's interior is under control. A quick and generous international official and private sector response has been sufficient to meet identified immediate needs. The picture remains less clear about medium term support that will be required to accommodate damage to the agricultural sector and health issues related to water sanitation and increased incidence of malaria; some eco-tourism sites were also badly hit. The new National Disaster Response Center (NCCR), stood up with U.S. training and material assistance since 2002 but untested in a country that rarely encounters disasters, won widespread praise from the international donor community for its cool and efficient handling of the crisis. End summary.

¶2. Suriname's May 3-17 flooding had varying, but non-life threatening, impact on over 20,000 of the 37,000 residents in affected areas of the interior. Water levels in the Upper Suriname River area have receded, and there was only minor flooding in the southern Kwamalasamutu area, although with some crop damage. High water levels continue to affect residents in the eastern region along the Marowijne and Tapanahony Rivers. Conditions are generally stabilizing, and expected to continue to improve - assuming no more severe rains through the remainder of the rainy season. The root cause of the flooding was heavy rainfall in upper catchment areas in Brazil. The water rose slowly, however, allowing many residents and medical clinics to rescue belongings. While the rivers rise every year in Suriname in June and July, the increase was much higher this year, and the earlier onset meant crops had generally not yet matured enough to withstand the high water.

¶3. Given the remote locations of affected populations, relief provision was a complicated logistic exercise. Initially, delivery was via inadequate and deteriorating road conditions linked to riverine transport; this was eventually supplemented by the loan of four Dutch and one Brazilian helicopters. While there are still isolated

pockets not completely served, emergency food, water, and shelter needs are generally being met using Surinamese governmental and non-governmental capabilities with support from the international community. Some complaints for unaddressed needs from communities in the interior, with the exception of shelter, are more chronic than flood-related. The Red Cross, pending correction on further assessment, intends to deliver temporary shelter supplies for 2,500 families, generally to sustain them during home clean up and repair. Comparatively few families are homeless in the sense of requiring relocation to temporary shelter.

¶4. Although the NCCR had never before handled a complex emergency situation, it drew very high marks under the leadership of National Army Colonel Slijngaard for accurately conveying needs to the international community and coordinating relief. On her departure, the leader of the UN disaster response team held up the NCCR's management as a prime example of how to shape cooperation among the army, police, NGOs, the Red Cross, and international organizations into a quick response to a crisis situation. Our own Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) experts echoed these views based on their observations of the NCCR in action. (Note: The NCCR's skills stem in part from U.S. security assistance, which provided first responder and warehouse management training for disaster logistics operations in 2004 and 2005. End note.)

¶5. Complicated logistics were in fact the greater constraint than resources. The Netherlands led the assistance effort, with a EURO 1 million cash donation from the Government of the Netherlands to UNDP, supplemented by the provision of helicopters and their fuel, as well as a plane-load of relief supplies and a team of disaster experts. A telethon in the Netherlands raised USD 500,000, and sister city relationships with Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and the Hague resulted in a further USD 833,000 contribution.

PARAMARIBO 00000311 002.2 OF 002

The EU's disaster agency donated over USD 400,000 toward malaria control. It appears that OFDA's USD 250,000 total contribution (to Red Cross emergency relief and to a Pan American Health Organization water sanitation project) was the next biggest official financial donation; IDB contributed USD 200,000. Brazil gave a planeload of relief supplies in addition to the use of one helicopter for two weeks. Venezuela is reportedly providing 20,000 barrels of fuel. In all, over USD 2 million for humanitarian assistance was funneled through international organizations including UNDP, PAHO, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNICEF, and the World Food Program (WFP).

¶6. UNDP figures from May 24 show a financing gap of over USD 300,000 in those humanitarian relief needs, but the amount is more than dwarfed by the nearly USD 3 million in domestic and international private and official donations. That figure does not/include contributions from parastatal and international corporations operating in Suriname. It is not apparent how post-emergency funding coordination for yet-to-be-finalized medium-term needs will be handled, although there have been discussions about the GOS creating a multi-ministerial successor entity to the NCCR to accomplish this task. To date, the NCCR's Colonel Slijngaard has left financial controls to a PAHO financial specialist; it is to be hoped that the GOS will ensure similarly transparent accountability for financing the tasks ahead.

¶7. On the health front, so far there have been a few reports of areas experiencing incidences of diarrhea, as safe water practices were disrupted by flood damage. PAHO has rigorous plans for water safety (where our OFDA assistance was concentrated) and malaria control programs in the short term. The fact that the system of health clinics serving the interior emerged largely unscathed is a huge benefit for disease surveillance. We understand that a

large-scale spraying campaign with support from the French will soon commence to attenuate the risk of malaria. Initial concerns that mercury from gold mining would spread with flooding to contaminate water supplies have not been borne out.

¶8. Comment: Barring renewed flooding due to heavy rains, attention can now gradually turn to a broader view of requirements for recovery. These will depend heavily on the results of assessments measuring the extent of crop losses, home and generator repairs. While handling of a natural disaster provides ample fodder for political posturing, outside observers at least agree that to date the NCCR was a credible and effective steward of relief efforts. Longer-term, transparent success in addressing the needs of Suriname's often-neglected interior populations will provide ample ground for renewed evaluation - by domestic political foes and the international community alike.

BARNES